BOLDBROOK LIBRARY
PACIFIC SCHOOL

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, Room 1111, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.

umber 30 March 1938

Religious Significance in Rural Handicrafts

By Mary G. Lacy*

Many social values have been pointed out in connection with the National Rural Arts Exhibition held last fall under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the patio of its building in Washington. One of them is the value of the opportunity it afforded to show how simple handicrafts may be the expression of religious feeling. This was evidenced again and again. The Nativity creche, carved from native wood by Mrs. Lawrence W. Collins of New Hampshire showed the Holy Family surrounded by kine and sheep and fowls, Joseph and Mary in attitudes of devotion as they looked down into the manger cradle. The feeling of adoration is shown in every beautiful line. No one who looked at it could fail to get not only the lift of heart that comes from seeing any beautiful thing but the added sense of seeing the tangible expression of love and belief centered in the Bethlehem story. It was easy to believe that most of those seeing it must long for a similar medium of personal expression for deep religious feeling. Another creche in which the shelter as well as all the furnishings and figures were made of corn husks, beautifully and skillfully woven, attracted much attention also. These figures included the three wise men and their camel approaching the rude shelter beneath which stood the figure of the Holy Mother near the manger cradle. Outside were the figures of several sheep and an ox resting on the ground. A lovely exhibit which drew many admirers was a bird feeding station full of beautiful color with St. Francis feeding the birds carved in the background.

Another exhibit somewhat out of this class because of the intricacy of conception and execution was the so-called Garden-of-Eden. This was a tree carved out of a single piece of wood, about eighteen inches high, with the symbolical figure of the Deity hidden in the blossom and fruit laden boughs and with carved figures of Adam and Eve in the foreground. The work on this was amazing in the infinite detail of the blossoming tree and the perfection of line in the figures. The patience and skill of the carving may certainly be considered an offering of love and simple faith in the Bible story. This was said to have been done by Indian converts to Christianity in our Southwest.

Then there were the musical instruments--fiddles, flutes, guitars, dulcimers--which brought to mind the story of the three Hebrew children who refused to worship the golden image set up by Nebuchadnesser at the "sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer and all kinds of Musick."** Imagination pictured a devout mountain family on the lean-to porch of a log cabin singing hymns and ballads to the accompaniment played upon these homemade instruments. It would no doubt be a revelation to many city dwellers to at-

---

*Miss Lacy is Librarian, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.

**Daniel III:5

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH U.S.

tend a mountain musical festival at White Top in Virginia, at Ashland, Kentucky, or at Asheville, North Carolina, where these quaint instruments are skillfully played and where the old time ballads and hymns are sung with heartiness and sweetness. Allen Eaton, of the Russell Sage Foundation, who made a two-year survey of the handicrafts of the Southern Highlands and who was the artist responsible for the strikingly beautiful arrangements of the exhibit material, writes as follows in his book entitled "Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands"*:

> "Reason would seem to uphold the claim that the Kentucky dulcimer originated in the Southern Highlands, and that only the name for it was derived from the instrument of Old World make. It is possible that the Kentucky dulcimer might have grown out of an attempt to fashion with a few crude tools and limited material an instrument after one faintly remembered..."

It may not be too far fetched to think that the name at least came directly from the Bible which is faithfully read by these people.

Among the material collected for this exhibit but not used because of lack of space was a miniature set of church furniture--lectern, pulpit, communion table and kneeling rail, baptismal font with a tiny cross as the handle of its cover, and pews--all of which were faithful copies of the furniture in the local church done by a twenty year old mountain boy who was the sole support of his invalid father, his mother and four younger children.

Now I happen to know this boy well. He worked hard and faithfully for pay all day, hurried home to work in the family field as long as the light lasted, and then began to whittle this church furniture by the light of a kerosene lamp as his evening pastime. When I first saw this work it was all finished but the communion rail and he had apparently stopped work. When I asked why, Claude said, "The little uprights for the communion rail are made from the sticks of all-day suckers and you know our children don't have many, so it will not be finished for a long time."

As we were leaving his mother said, "Wait, I want you to see a painting he has done." She brought a small slab of pine wood upon which he had painted across the top the outline of the beautiful blue mountains to the East which the house faced, and at their feet a border of daisies--and off in a lower corner, surrounded by a dark band, the words "God bless our home." It was all so crude but so plainly an attempt to express his appreciation of the natural beauty with which the little home was surrounded, and the sense that God had given it.

This same boy said to me once, "I am the richest person in the world." "How do you make that out?" I asked. He replied with a shining face, "I have my health, my hands and all the world to work in." It is just this breath-taking human dignity which fills and enriches life among the mountain highlanders and transcends the satisfaction of material desires. Probably it is not accidental that in the Southern Highlands rather than in any other region in America we find the greatest abundance of indigenous handicrafts and the widest variety of people at work on them. All members of the family have a part.

---

*Eaton, Allen. Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands, p. 201. Quoted with the kind permission of the author and of the Russell Sage Foundation.

They know that it is not what we have but what we are and do that matters--sometimes simplicity and patience seem supreme excellence.

Virgil said:

"It is the Father's will
That there should be no easy way to till."*

and Emerson said: "The farmer times himself to Nature, and acquires that livelong patience which belongs to her,"** and in another place in the same essay he said: "The glory of the farmer is that, in the division of labors, it is his part to create."***

Allen Eaton writes in his preface to his book on the handicrafts:

"He who does creative work, whether he dwell in a palace or in a hut, has in his house a window through which he may look out upon some of life's finest scenes. If his work be a handicraft he will be especially happy, for it will help him not only to perceive much of the beauty of the world about him, but, what is man's greatest privilege, to identify himself with it. If it enables him to earn his daily bread, then he should rejoice, for blessed is the man who has found his work; but if, as will be the case of many in our day, his handicraft is not a way of making a living, but through self-expression a help toward a fuller life, he too will rejoice, for he has all the privileges of his fellow-craftsmen without the need of fitting his product to the market ..."****

Mr. Eaton goes on to point out that each handicraft has its own special reward, but there are a few compensations which all handicrafts bring to him who works at this open window. First, the opportunity for self-expression, which the modern advantages of much of life's work does not give. Another compensation is a growing appreciation of beauty in the things of everyday life. The craftsman recognizing beauty in things that he had not noticed before, or had regarded as commonplace, feels himself a joint possessor with those who have designed them and with all others who enjoy them.

The joy of creation is a very important reason for encouraging the development of rural handicrafts but equally important is the recognition that the supplying of the needs of the family from the materials at hand necessitates labor and ingenuity in their use. William Creech of Pine Mountain, Kentucky, is quoted by Mr. Eaton as saying: "Hit's better for folkses characters to larn 'em to do things with their hands." There is no question of the truth of this, especially if the result of doing things with their hands results in the greater comfort of the family, and the improvement of the economic welfare of its members in addition to the joy of the development of skill and the creation of beauty. The Handicraft Guild of the Diocese of the Southwest Virginia through Miss Mabel R. Mansfield reports that it was able to sell last year about $3,000 worth of the handicraft work of the mountaineers of the area in which she works. This group makes many creches and carves small wooden crosses, for which there seems to be an inexhaustible demand. The very making of these objects symbolizes and invigorates the religious aspects of their daily life.

---

*Georgics, Lib. I, 121
**Essay on Farming
***Ibid.
****Op. cit. Quoted with permission.

The lives of most Biblical characters were lived in the country. The Bible abounds in references to growing things, to animals and birds and to the natural beauty of skies and water and the sun, moon and stars. The earthly father of the child Jesus was a carpenter--a craftsman--and there seems little reasonable doubt that our Savior himself worked with His father in making needed articles of wood. His Mother knew the weaving craft for she wove for Him a seamless coat so beautifully made that it excited the cupidity of His persecutors and they cast lots for it as He hung upon the Cross. She achieved, by the weaving of that beautiful garment, the tangible and artistic expression of beauty by doing a needed thing better than it needed to be done.

Thus the handicrafts have a rich and sacred heritage back through history. Add to this heritage the unique opportunity they supply today to start the boy and girl, the man and woman, in the mountain cabin, on the farm, or wherever they may be, to utilizing the material they find at hand in a sure quest for beauty, for creative achievement and for lasting satisfaction.

All improvement must start from where we are. Seldom can we be lifted out of the environment, the home and community ties to which we are born or wherein we find ourselves and start all over again. We must start from where we are, with the materials we have (physical materials and human relations) and go on from there--and the handicrafts often supply just the incentive that is needed.

"We men of earth have here the stuff
Of Paradise - We have enough!
We need no other stones to build
The Temple of the Unfulfilled -
No other ivory for the doors -
No other marble for the floors -
No other cedar for the beam
And dome of man's immortal dream.
Here on the paths of every day
Here on the common human way,
Is all the stuff the gods would take
To build a Heaven, to mold and make
New Edens. Ours the task sublime
To build Eternity in time."*

There are many interesting angles from which the religious significance of rural handicrafts may be considered. Their therapeutic and healing value is one. Various exhibits could be referred to which would illustrate this aspect. The development of a spirit of patience with detail has already been noted for farm people know from their constant contact with Nature that creative forces cannot be hurried and that this is what the Psalmist meant when he wrote, "Be still and know that I am God."**

St. Paul when he admonished the Thessalonians to "Study to be quiet and to do your own business and to work with your own hands,"*** was advocating the same underlying principle which is basic in all creative impulse as it is in religion.

---

*Edwin Markham, "Earth is Enough" from SHOES OF HAPPINESS AND OTHER POEMS. Copyrighted by the author and used by his permission.
**Psalm XLVI:10
***Thess. IV:11

PRINTED IN U. S. A.